



**Commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet
West Loch Disaster Commemoration
National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific
Admiral Cecil D. Haney
21 May 2013
As Prepared for Delivered**

Thank you Artie Wilson for that introduction.

I would also like to thank Ms. Deloris Guttman for her work as president of the African-American Diversity Cultural Center and of course her work as a historian committed to the memory of the West Loch disaster. Thank you Deloris for bringing us together today.

Senator Espero, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, it is an honor and privilege for me to be offering remarks during this solemn commemoration of a tragedy that occurred 69 years ago. We are gathered to honor the sacrifice of those brave service members who lost their lives and those who were injured in the West Loch disaster of 1944.

It was just over two years after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States military was engaged in fierce combat as we fought for control of various islands throughout the Pacific. In May 1944 we prepared for Operation Forager, the invasion of Saipan and Tinian. The plan was to occupy those islands so that we could base B-29 bombers to conduct strategic bombing missions against the Japanese homeland.

In preparation for the invasion, 34 large amphibious landing ships were being readied in the West Loch. Twenty-nine of these ships were Landing Ship, Tanks; simply called LSTs. These ships were designed to sail right up to a beachhead, opening the front end and landing troops and supplies on the beaches to engage the enemy. They were enormous ships over 300 feet in length, 50 feet wide. They were described as “floating ammunition dumps, floating gasoline storage tanks, floating vehicle garages, floating ship repair yards, and floating overcrowded hotels.” Due to the high tempo of wartime operations and the necessity for these ships to depart on their critical mission, the nesting of these ships closely together, while loading them to capacity with volatile fuel, ammunition and equipment was a calculated, but regrettable risk.

May 21, 1944 was a calm, peaceful Sunday here in Hawaii, perhaps much like today. At approximately 3:08 p.m. that calm was shattered by the first of several explosions. It started on LST-353 as fuel and ammunition stores were ignited.

I can only imagine the chaos and confusion that ensued.

Motor Machinist Mate 2nd Class Jim Baird had just assumed the watch in the auxiliary engine room of that LST when the first explosion began to shake the bulkheads. He rushed topside

when the next explosion rocked the ship. He noticed the heroic efforts of a shipmate advancing into the flames with a limp fire hose. The explosions had already disabled the ship's firefighting system.

Red-hot shrapnel and scorching flames from LST-353 were hurled at nearby ships, touching off additional explosions. Petty Officer Baird witnessed men from other ships being driven overboard into the water to escape the ensuing flames. He saw crews of nearby LSTs frantically trying to start their ship's engines, directing firefighting efforts and cutting mooring lines.

The crews of those ships and tug boats engaged in firefighting showed unbelievable courage as the explosions and fires raged. Those firefighters would surge into the fray, only to be driven back by the erupting flames and startling explosions. They fought desperately to keep the fire from spreading to other ships of the fleet at anchorage.

One firefighting tug wedged itself between two burning LSTs, driving them apart and away from each other while spraying both with water. The brave tug crew knew that if either ship exploded, there was no chance of survival. Another tug threw a line to a burning LST and pulled it to safety in an isolated area of the loch.

In the face of the searing flames and violent explosions, helpless men struggled to save their own lives and the lives of others. Many of the survivors were saved by chance as much as by their own efforts. For example, Petty Officer Baird was blown off the top of his ship by the final explosion. He was able to swim to another LST where he climbed onto its lowered bow door, escaping the umbrella of searing shrapnel raining down on others.

The fires from the disaster burned for more than 24 hours. 163 servicemen lost their lives, nearly 400 lay wounded. Because of the heroic efforts on that day, of the 34 amphibious ships in the area, only six LSTs and three smaller landing craft were destroyed while other ships and rescue boats suffered extensive damage. The force of the blasts also destroyed 11 buildings and overturned vehicles parked along the shore.

I think you get the picture of what this disaster looked like.

Today, we gather to honor, remember and pay our respects to the brave men who lost their lives on that fateful day. They were not just Sailors, soldiers, Marines and Coast Guardsmen, they were sons, brothers, husbands and fathers. Young men, some only teenagers, many in their 20s, came from every walk of life, representing the diverse culture of our Nation. Amidst the social and economic inequalities faced by so many in the 1940s, these men answered the call of our Nation as patriots committed to defeating our enemies.

Perhaps no other unit associated with the disaster represented the cultural and social challenges our Nation struggled with more acutely than the Army's 29th Chemical Decontamination Unit assigned to Schofield Barracks. As a segregated African-American unit, they were often called on to do the less glamorous jobs, sometimes as messmen, gravediggers, or for the manual labor involved with dangerous materials, toxic chemicals and volatile explosives.

On that fateful day the 29th had been called upon to transfer ammunition on LST-353. With no training on how to properly handle these explosives, nearly 100 men of the 29th faithfully followed orders transferring mortar rounds onboard LST-353 when it exploded. Nearly 1/3 of all the casualties that day came from the 29th.

Very little is written of the tragedy or its aftermath in the history books. The families of the victims were not told what happened to their loved ones at the time. They were simply told that they were missing.

Due to war requirements, the West Loch Disaster was classified Top Secret until 1960. But we do know that in time the wounded were healed, ships and equipment were repaired, preparations continued and Operation Forager was ultimately successful.

Only a few months after the explosions at the West Loch shook the calm here on Oahu, our Nation suffered a similar catastrophe at Port Chicago Naval base near San Francisco, in which 320 people were killed. More than 200 of them were African-American Sailors also conducting ammunition transfers.

Sometimes tragedy is the greatest motivator for change. In the wake of these disasters, lessons were learned and applied, safety improvements were made and intensive training programs were implemented.

I'm sure that our military personnel here in the audience know to what extremes we adhere to with respect to our procedures for ammo and fuel loading today. Those safety procedures and our safety record are part of their legacy.

Today, all that remains as a reminder of this tragedy is the rusted hulk of LST-480, resting along Walker Bay on the Waipio Peninsula. There is a wayside exhibit near the Whiskey Piers, directly across from the remains of LST-480.

Here at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, these memorial markers only read "Unknown" to mark the remains of those who lost their lives that day and that could not be identified. Thanks to the efforts of my friend and Pearl Harbor survivor Ray Emory, these markers now read "Unknown, West Loch Disaster, Pearl Harbor, May 21, 1944."

Of course there also remain the scars carried by the survivors. There are the memories of those lost that day that still remain in the hearts and minds of survivors, family members, shipmates and friends. They feel the loss that this day represents more acutely than perhaps any other.

Much has changed during the 69 years that have passed since that terrible tragedy. The war that demanded the efforts of an entire Nation is over. Once bitter enemies are now closest allies. We no longer accept segregation, as the many races and cultures that make up our great Nation now grow and work together, instead of remaining separate. Finally, a secret that kept the sacrifice of these brave men silent for so long is now known, honored and commemorated.

As we gather on this hallowed ground where so many of our Nation's heroes have been laid to rest, we pay our respects to those who have sacrificed so much. It is particularly fitting that we reflect on the legacy of the West Loch disaster, especially as we approach Memorial Day. By remembering them, they once again live in our presence; they are here with us, patriots and heroes all.

May God grant them and their families peace. May God bless our Nation, our military and all of those who sacrifice so much for the freedom of our Nation and the values that we promote throughout the world.

Mahalo.